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The Iron Age Clay Figurines from Karkemish and the Syro-Anatolian Region

Barbara Bolognani

- 1 The main focus of my PhD research project is the study of clay figurines coming from the Neo-Hittite city of Karkemish, excavated by the British Museum between 1911 and 1920 and, more recently, by the Joint Turco-Italian Archaeological Expedition of the universities of Bologna, Istanbul, and Gaziantep since 2011.¹ Their study will be framed within Iron Age coroplastic art from the Syro-Anatolian region, with special reference to the typological, iconographic, and above all chronological developments of this class.
- 2 Some clay figurines recovered by the first British exploration at Karkemish were published in the excavation reports of that site. They were generally dated not earlier than the 12th century B.C. and, because of their large presence in surface layers, they were usually called “Late Hittite.” “Snow man” was the name given to the technique of these figurines by the excavators because they were handmodeled using simple, rounded forms ; no molded specimens were found. At that time there was no attempt to classify this material, except to highlight the strong preponderance of animal figurines (horses, also with riders), above all in the Lower Town. For this reason the excavators rejected the idea that these figurines could be used for religious purposes, stressing their use as toys instead.

Clay figurines found at Karkemish during the British Museum excavations



(WOOLLEY-BARNETT 1952, PL. 70)

- 3 Other figurines were found during the Yunus excavations,² the most important necropolis of the Iron Age belonging to Karkemish and located less than 1 km north-west of the city. These figurines were found in tombs dated variously between the 12th and the 7th centuries B. C. Methodological limitations lead to an incorrect interpretation of the grave goods, as the archaeologists thought, in fact, that they were able to attribute the sex and the age of the deceased on the basis of the iconography of the figurines found in the burial.
- 4 The most recent Turco-Italian archaeological campaigns of 2011 to 2013 have already yielded more than 450 clay figurines that were recovered from various contexts at both Karkemish and Yunus. One of the most promising research avenues of my project is the stratigraphic analysis of Iron Age clay figurines that will enable a precise definition of their chronological and typological development. This kind of production, despite being widely attested, has not yet benefited of an extensive and in-depth study.
- 5 A superficial analysis of the corpus reveals that two groups can be distinguished on the basis of manufacturing technique. The larger of the two groups is characterized by the continuation of the hand-modeled technique that dates back to the Middle Bronze Age.³ Karkemish, and in general the Middle Euphrates, would seem to be the major areas in which this tradition continued, as well as western Syria⁴. Current opinion maintains that in this group there was a proliferation of types compared to the reference models and that this production had no connections to the religious sphere. From a purely technological point of view, the main iconographic subjects reproduced are both human figures, male and female, and animal ones, domestic and wild, which, unlike those of the

Middle Bronze Age, abound in applied ornamental bands and medallions that represent jewelry, hairstyles, and harness.

- 6 The smaller of the two groups contains new iconographic types that begin to appear in Iron Age II and that spread to Syria, Palestine, and Cilicia. These are mold-made in a low to medium relief and almost always depict frontal, nude females with both arms either held at the sides or raised to the chest with both hands supporting the breasts. The origins of this last type were found in the Old Babylonian coroplastic production and later in the Levantine Late Bronze Age, with its use seemingly related to the sphere of domestic cult.

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NOTES

1. HOGARTH 1914; WOOLLEY, BARNETT 1952; MARCHETTI *et al.* 2012; MARCHETTI 2012.
2. WOOLLEY 1939.
3. MARCHETTI 2001.
4. MATTHIAE 1997; PRUß 2010.

INDEX

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